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For the Belfast Monthly Magazine.

ON CREDULITY.

NOTWITHSTANDING I am a firm believer in the doctrine of the progressive improvement of mankind, I frequently meet with occurrences to shake my confidence in it; I, however, am inclined to believe, that these are only exceptions to the general rule, and therefore, notwithstanding occasional unfavourable appearances, I retain my early prepossession in favour of this doctrine, so consolatory to the friends of man.—Yet I must admit, that this improvement is not rapidly progressive, but proceeds by slow degrees.

Mankind appear to be divided into two classes, the dupers, and the duped. The former being the smaller number, exert their pernicious activity to impose on the unreflecting part of the community, and are very unwilling to forego the advantages they acquire over the numerous flocks of the duped, and which advantages they are careful dishonestly to turn to their own emolument.

I think there is more of this dupery in England than with us: not, I suppose, from their greater credulity or cullibility, but because being a richer nation, they are better able to afford the luxury of being duped. From them, therefore, as affording the most prominent instances of cullibility, I shall for the present principally select my examples.

About twenty-two years ago I was in England, when the rage of animal magnetism was in fashion; it was the general subject of conversation, and many from whom better things might have been expected, were first dupes, and then in their turn became dupers in this silly mystery. I had the curiosity to go to see these tricks practised by a physician in Bristol, on a number of persons seated in a room for the purpose. The operator walked round his company; he pointed his fingers at them individually, and I observed he particularly tried to rouse their imaginations, and touched such parts of the body as were supposed most likely to be susceptible of nervous sensation, particularly the stomach, and between the fingers. The company on that evening seemed peculiarly insensible; they were mostly of the working class of the community, both male and female, and appeared so fatigued with the labours of the day, as to be very little sensible to the powers of imagination. They showed no symptom of being disturbed; the operator gave up further practising on such unpromising subjects, and I came away without beholding them thrown into a *crisis*, as in their jargon they called the effects of their imposition. Animal magnetism long continued its hold of English credulity. It was imported from France, like other cast-off fashions of that volatile people. It had been introduced into that country by a German quack, Mesmer, and from his name was denominated Mesmerism; but in Paris its reign was short, for a committee of the French academicians, among whom was associated for this purpose, the sagacious and quick-sighted Franklin, detected the imposition, and interrupted its progress in the fashionable circles of Paris. The disappointed Mesmer inoculated the English, and for a considerable length of time animal magnetism was one of their reigning follies.

To animal magnetism next came its fit successor Perkinism, or the metallic tractors of Dr. Perkins, a physician from Connecticut, in North America, who contrived for a number of years to fill his coffers by practising on English credulity, and selling his tractors, two small pieces of metal, of about the size of black-lead pencils, at five guineas per pair. He has since retired to his native country, to enjoy the fruits of his imposture. I think I am fully warranted in designating his tractors by the title of an imposture, which he knowingly practised, because on being required to explain them to some physicians, and other men of science, he declined; but contented himself with speaking ambiguously of their nature, so as to endeavour to give the appearance of their being connected with the effects of Galvanism, that wonderful discovery, then, and even still, so imperfectly understood; but with which there appears no reason to connect them, as, if he could have demonstrated the connection on scien-

tific grounds, he would, doubtless, have availed himself of the opportunity to have shown their affinity to legitimate science. It is true he procured attestations of cures performed by his wonder-working tractors, in removing rheumatism, paralysis, and various other maladies to which human nature is heir. But the value of these attestations, and how easily they can be procured from the dupes of credulity, were strongly exemplified, and brought to the test by the late ingenious Dr. Beddoes, a name dear to the lovers of science. He provided two bits of sticks, resembling the tractors in shape; coloured them, one red, and the other black, and dignified them with the names of rouge and noir. He assembled his dupes, and practised on them, as Perkins had done with his tractors, and obtained attestations of cures he had performed by his harmless pieces of wood. He then published the attestations of his imaginary cures, and rendered true science, and the art of healing, the essential service of demonstrating the real value of such attestations, and showed the frauds practised under cover of them by the friends of the tractors, and other venders of quack medicines.

This detection is a useful chapter in the natural history of man, and shows how liable he is to become the dupe to his credulity, and to the impositions of the designing. Tractors yet hold their place, and have their advocates, in spite of detection, and in opposition to the principles of true science, and may probably descend to posterity with their worthy associates, the Balm of Gilead, of Dr. Solomon, and the empiricisms of Dr. Brodum, and other quacks.

So far imposture and cullibility have been pourtrayed, as they were connected with medical science. When connected with theology they have produced equal aberrations in the human intellect. Brothers utters his insane ravings: they pass for prophecies among his scarcely less insane votaries. He is shut up in an asylum for mad-men, while they walk at large, and by common courtesy are supposed capable of performing the functions of life, among which it must be allowed that in the estimation of many, reflection and examination do not form a necessary part. The learning of a Halhed did not prevent him from supporting in his place, as a member of the British house of commons, the reveries of Richard Brothers. Indeed we are able to furnish a match for the learned Halhed, in a member of our Irish house of commons, who advocated the doctrine of the millennium, and boldly pronounced that the union of Ireland with Great Britain would never take place, because it was inconsistent with his fanciful interpretations of the Revelations. In the instances of Halhed and Dobbs, there is no ground to impute imposture to them; the whole tenor of the life of our country-man, whose character is best known in this country, leaves no room for the imputation on him, and the conduct of the other is equally free from reproach. They were led astray by their fancies: but the cullibility of those who adopted their wanderings is no less to be noticed, and no less strong proofs of the credulity of mankind are, in these instances, afforded. Let a doctrine be ever so absurd, it will have votaries, for credulity will ever be a prevailing disposition, until mankind more generally exercise an independent judgment, and think for themselves. Indolence or a disinclination to be at the trouble to examine, and ignorance the consequence of such a disposition, will always make fit instruments to be wrought upon by the workings of insanity, or the lures of imposture.

The prophecy of Brothers, that London would be destroyed by an earthquake on a certain day, and his other similar vagaries were not verified; and the dissolution of the Irish parliament, and its incorporation with Great Britain, however contrary to the construction of a figure in the revelations did certainly take place. The votaries of credulity, uninstructed by such failures, did not reform, but were disposed to give equal credence to the next tale of wonder. Probably some may say, as Dr. Johnson attempted to reason about ghosts, that no one can disprove their existence, or say that the Cock-lane ghost could not act, as was credulously believed at that day, until the entire business was known to be an imposition, and a foul conspiracy;

for Dr. Johnson, with his high learning, was a dupe to credulity and superstition. By such sophistical argumentation, he might, with equal propriety have proved the existence of witches, fairies, vampyres, "gorgons, hydras, and chimeras dire," and the thousand non-entities adopted by the credulity of mankind in ancient and modern times. To give up arguments drawn from facts, and to have recourse to suppositions and the doctrine of probabilities would tend to bring us back to the tales of the nursery, and produce a complete retrogradation in human knowledge.

I shall now bring forward another instance of the prevailing fondness for believing the marvellous, and mention Joanna Southcott, who has collected a large party in England, to support her pretensions to a divine mission, and to the gift of prophesying. She and her disciples claim "that she is an handmaid of the Lord, to precede the second coming and the reign of Christ on earth, for 1000 years, which events are immediately to take place: that there are many instances well attested of the appearance of persons deceased, to several now living, who have confirmed the truth of her mission, and charged their friends to acknowledge its authenticity: and that she hears a still small voice, as a rustling wind, which dictates the whole of her writings, neither studied, nor submitted to subsequent alteration."

This woman has been making these pretensions since the year 1792, and whether she be self-imposed on, a dupe to her own fancies, or as an impostor attempting to dupe others, or probably acting in both characters, she has contrived to procure a large number of followers, of various professions and ranks. Credulity, like Fame, is honoured by a numerous attendance.

——"Suppliant crouds the shrine attend
And all degrees before the Goddess bend."

Joanna Southcott numbers among her votaries, members of the establishment, and has her disciples among the different classes of dissenters; for credulity does not exclusively belong to any one sect. Daniel Roberts a Quaker of Painswick in Gloucestershire writes a pamphlet to declare his belief in her divine mission, and to complain of the conduct of his society towards him on account of his reception of her doctrines, and entitles his book, "Observations relative to the divine mission of Joanna Southcott, with a detail of the proceedings of the people called Quakers against a member for his belief," in which he details many particulars of her supposed prophecies. He admits that her prophecy of the scarcity in 1800, though written, was not published till after the event.—In 1803 she is reported to have prophecied the downfall of the Turkish empire, and of the city of Medina: and the destruction of Medina in 1805 by the Wahabees is held to be the accomplishment of her prediction—He says she predicted the deaths of two bishops of Exeter, and of Pitt and Fox—But he brings forward no proof of these predictions being clearly made before these events took place, and credulity with her fanciful interpretations of obscure and studiedly ambiguous expressions is a bad evidence in such a case.

Thomas Philip Foley, Rector of Old-swinford in Worcestershire, has published an advertisement in the Leeds Mercury, dated in March last, in which he vindicates Joanna Southcott from having predicted the destruction of Bath on Good Friday last, when many of the inhabitants, dupes to their superstitious fears, left that city expectation of the prophecy being fulfilled—it appearing to be another woman who imposed on their credulity. He also endeavours to vindicate Joanna from want of discernment in giving one of her seals to Mary Bateman who lately occasioned the death of Mary Perigo, the poor woman in Leeds, who fell a prey to her own credulity, and that of her equally credulous husband. Joanna Southcott has been charged with selling her seals at half a crown each, for she assumes the right to seal the elect; for the refutation of this charge and for a short summary of her doctrine, I shall give the Rector's words; as affording a curious instance of his ready faith.

"To the third. This is as unfounded as the second charge, viz. "that

Joanna Southcott has sold her Seals for half a crown each." Now it happens there are more than fifteen thousand people who can prove she never sold a Seal in her life, or ever suffered one to be sold, for her seals were given "without money, and without price," a free gift to all that had faith to believe in her inspired writings, as well to the rich, as to the poor.

"Having thus cleared up the charges against Joanna Southcott, I shall give a short sketch of her divine mission, which is to warn the world of the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to destroy Satan's kingdom of misery, evil and woe, and to establish his own glorious kingdom of love and peace upon the earth for a thousand years, as is promised in the 20th chapter of the Revelations, when he will reign in spirit among the children of men during that period before the general judgment."

It is time to close this disgusting catalogue of human errors—I shall only adduce one more instance. William Huntingdon, a man in London, who modestly adds S. S. (sinner saved) to his name, receives whatever he prays for. He stood in need of a pair of breeches, and prayed accordingly: next day a pair which exactly fitted was sent to him—The credulity of his flock is likely to be pretty highly taxed. He will probably be as hard on them in praying, as Sir William Johnson was with the Indian in dreaming. The Indian said he dreamed he received a present of a handsome coat from Sir William, who in his turn dreamed that the Indian had given up to him a large portion of his hunting grounds. Both dreams were fulfilled, but the Indian declined any longer to continue the commerce. Probably the Sinner Saved may also tire out his congregation with his prayers.

From all these instances one inference is clear. When we depart from the guidance of reason we are liable to fall into innumerable errors. Ignorance is the source of credulity.

We are therefore imperiously called on to instruct ourselves, and to attend to the results of experience. If the many would by the acquirement of knowledge, and a consequent enlargement of mind, raise themselves above the rank of dupes, the number of dupers who have been accustomed to prey on them would speedily decrease, while another numerous class, who are first duped, and then unwillingly lend themselves to spread the imposture, would see through the snare, and no longer without any bad intention act as decoys to others. According to the aphorism of Lord Bacon, "knowledge is power," especially if our attention is directed to that kind of knowledge which is best adapted to our individual sphere: we are culpable if we neglect the means of acquiring it. when we have them within our reach.

K.

For the Belfast Monthly Magazine.

If the object of the Belfast Magazine be to bring forward the germ of knowledge, as well as display its more mature branches, the accompanying essays, composed as school themes, may not perhaps be unworthy of insertion.

VIS CONSILI EXPERS MOLE RUIT SUA.

IT is wisdom that raises us rational beings above the rest of the creation. It regulates all our desires, and guides us in all our pursuits, showing to us what is worthy of our attention, and how our ends may be attained. To this, our mental part, the body is subservient, and is merely the instrument with which we transact. Without prudence our strength is of no use; we attempt things which are impossible, and frequently turning our backs on the very object we wish to obtain, run blindfold; and the more strength we have, the farther we are driven from the desired point.

It is not the body alone that requires the restraint and direction of wisdom; but also our desires, if not restrained by reason, would hurry us on to the greatest improprieties. And indeed the strongest minds have generally the strongest desires; like a rapid river which having once overrun its banks takes a great strength to restrain and force it back into its proper course; whilst a mind of weaker powers can be restrained by a weaker impulse. Thus nature has it so planned, that where she has wantonly bestowed